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ABSTRACT

This very brief item discusses the tendency of the highly gifted to be argumentative by nature, a characteristic described as being embedded in personality structure as well as measurable by two traits, perceiving and judging, in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. A number of suggestions are provided to parents and teachers for techniques to use in dealing with the argumentative personality. (LC)

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# The Walking Argument

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How many times have you heard, "That's not fair!"?? It seems appropriate in an issue devoted to "Thinking Skills" to address the thinking function taken to its extreme: the Walking Argument. One of the most disconcerting qualities of the gifted is their tendency to argue with everyone about everything. This is particularly true of the highly gifted, who have an inherent need for precision in thought and language.

In 1927, Leta Hollingworth described "early interest in the precise meanings of words" (p.3) as one of the symptoms of high ability. She went on to say:

> Exactness in all mental performances is characteristic, and keen love of precise facts. Allied to this is the perception of things in their multitudinous relationships, with frequent use of the phrase, "Well that depends." A young child who spontaneously utters the phrase, "That depends," is sure to catch the attention of one who thoroughly knows gifted children. (p. 4)

Hollingworth (1939) recognized that the highly gifted are very argumentative by nature and she dealt with the problem by providing special training in "disputation" to children above 170 IQ, so that they would learn how to argue fairly. One of her students, Dr. Herbert Carroll, developed a training program in forensics for the gifted including:

> argument with oneself, involving logic and psychology of thinking; argument with others in private, involving etiquette and the art of polite disagreement; argument in public, involving parliamentary law, the rules of order, the nature of evidence, and the art of the persuasion of crowds. (Hollingworth, 1939, p. 585)

Sounds a lot like a "thinking skills" curriculum, doesn't it?

The roots of argumentativeness are imbedded in personality structure as well as in intelligence. In my last column, I mentioned two of the traits revealed by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962), "perceiving" and "judging." Two additional traits measured by the same instrument play a role in the need to argue: "intuition" and "thinking."

Highly gifted children and adults are often intuitive thinkers, whereas mildly gifted tend

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to be intuitive feelers. Intuitive thinkers have two ways to be right- logic and intuition- so you can never win an argument with them. Individuals high in both traits learn by questioning, arguing and debating. They are born lawyers! Since they are used to being right, their need to be right can become a compulsion. They may need assistance in learning to respect the feelings of others.

If you are living with or trying to teach an Argument, here are some tips.

Try not to feel threatened by the child's need to argue. Some minds need to argue as a form of exercise.

Be clear about what is negotiable and what is not. If you have firm standards on certain issues, (e.g., name calling is not allowed, everybody helps, etc.), the child will learn to respect those boundaries.

Appeal to the child's growing sense of fairness. Ask, "Is this 'fair' for just you or is it fair for everyone, including me?"

Help the child understand other's feelings. The need to be right can be tempered by helping the child understand other people's feelings and reactions to their arguments.

Discuss mercy versus justice. Talk about values of mercy and justice. Then look for applications of both in various situations in real life, books, and the media. When is mercy more appropriate than justice?

Be a role model of appreciation for other views. Children learn what they see. Do you have an acute need to be right that you are inadvertently teaching through your actions?

Use humor. When all else fails, "That's why I'm the mommy," may have to be said with love and good spirits.

Get counseling. If the child or other family members are terribly threatened unless they are right all the time, this is a sign of low self-esteem and may need professional assistance.

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